

**The Connecticut State Advisory Council
for Special Education**

**Annual Report
2021**



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MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

In accordance with Connecticut General Statute 10-76i, The State Advisory Council for Special Education (Council) is reporting its annual activity and recommendations as related to special education, including unmet needs, of children and youth with disabilities.

The impact of the global coronavirus pandemic required a change from in-person education to remote learning which resulted in challenges for all students but especially for students with special needs. As an advisory council we needed to pivot from our originally planned priorities for 2020 to expanded priorities during the pandemic. The Council continued its work remotely, increased our meeting frequency, and shared feedback on pending or new guidance from our multiple stakeholder groups.

The following report provides recommendations for our original 2020 priorities including: teacher preparation, assistive technology and accessible educational materials, and secondary transition. As the situation evolved during the spring and summer, feedback was given on special education guidance being issued related to the pandemic.

The Council would like to thank the CSDE for their continued partnership, support, and collaboration in this work. Additionally, the Council acknowledges the tremendous struggles/challenges that our educators and parents have faced and continue to face during this pandemic and the creative and innovative strategies that are being implemented to maintain high educational expectations for students with disabilities. Having said this, we acknowledge the impact this pandemic has had on students with disabilities since March and as the weeks turned to months it was evident that the priorities of the Council needed to pivot from the original priorities to address concerns evolving from the pandemic. During the pandemic, priorities shifted to policies and procedures, the least restrictive environment and best practices for remote learning and these will continue throughout 2021.

The other functions of the Council included activities of the nominating, membership and legislative subcommittees and are also reported herein.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the members of the Council who, through the global coronavirus pandemic including the unprecedented closure of schools across the state, not only continued to volunteer on this council, but responded with unwavering commitment to represent the voices of their stakeholders. Various members of the Council also contributed to and provided feedback, often within very short turnaround time, on important State Department of Education guidance documents and communications to school districts and families. These contributions from the Council have been well received and ensured stakeholders were representing the needs of students with disabilities. It has been an honor to serve with passionate members of this Council. We are fortunate to have such a committed group serving on this Council.

Thank you,



Tammy Raccio, Chair, State Advisory Council for Special Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Connecticut State Advisory Council for Special Education ("SAC" or "Council") has established authority under Section 10-76i of the Connecticut General Statutes and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), 34 CFR Section 300.169. The Council's purpose is to advise the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) of unmet needs in educating students with disabilities and to recommend to the General Assembly any changes to the law, regulations, standards and guidelines pertaining to Special Education in the state.

The Council is to report to the General Assembly by February 15 in even-numbered years and January 15 in odd-numbered years.

This annual report reflects Council activity from February 2020 through January 2021. The Council has worked collaboratively with the Bureau of Special Education to address the statutory requirements of the Council. The Council reports to the General Assembly, CSDE, Office of Labor Relations, and the State Library.

COUNCIL LEADERSHIP

Thomas Cosker served as Chairperson through the May 13, 2020, Council meeting. On September 30, 2020, the Membership Committee identified a slate of officers to be brought forth to the full Council on that afternoon. During that meeting Tammy Raccio was nominated to be the Council Chairperson and Jennifer Lussier was nominated to continue in the role of Vice-Chairperson. The State Advisory Council would like to thank these individuals for their leadership throughout this reporting period. In addition, the following members were appointed by Ms. Raccio, as Chairperson, to conduct Committee work:

Executive Committee: Chair, Tammy Raccio, Vice-Chair, Jennifer Lussier, Bryan Klimkiewicz, SDE Liaison (non-voting), Immediate Past Chair, Thomas Cosker, Susan Homrok-Lemke and Nachi Bhatt.

Legislative Committee: Chair, Jeffrey Spahr, Jennifer Lussier, Rick Raucci, Susan Homrok-Lemke, Doris Maldonado and Monica Hatton.

Membership/ Nominating Committee: Chair, Catherine Summ, Jennifer Lussier, Louis Tallarita, Mike Nunes, Jonathan Metcalf, Melissa Wrigley, and Allison Kopie, Brian Smith and Jonathan Metcalf.

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

The Council, with the support of the Membership Committee, is pleased to report a minimum amount of vacancies and consistent participation of At-Large and Appointed members throughout this reporting period. The commitment of these dedicated individuals did not waver, even during the pandemic, despite the many personal and professional responsibilities that remain. The Membership Committee is charged with maintaining focus on the participation and contributions of student membership during a time when student voice is even more critical. On February 1, 2020, the Council had the following vacancies:

- Parents: 2
- Public School Teacher: 1
- Non-voting members of the General Assembly: 5

On January 1, 2021, the Council has the following vacancies: (See Appendix A).

- Non-voting members of the General Assembly: 4

The Membership Committee had completed the following activities:

- Revised/updated the Council member recruitment process.
- Created an Electronic Application Process.
- Revised/updated attendance documentation and monitoring process.
- Reviewed applications and prepared prospective Council members for the Executive Committee and the full Council. Candidate recommendations were considered based upon role, level of interest, and representation of the State of Connecticut with regard to racial/ethnic background, geographic residency/location, and the broadest range of representation of disability categories (parents of child/youth or individual with a disability).

COUNCIL ACTIVITY

Meeting agendas and minutes are posted on the CSDE website on the following link: <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Special-Education/CT-State-Advisory-Council-for-Special-Education/Meeting-Agendas>

Full Council Meetings were held on:

- March 27, 2020 – Cancelled due to COVID-19
- April 8, 2020
- April 22, 2020
- May 13, 2020
- July 22, 2020 (orientation/training)
- September 30, 2020
- November 18, 2020
- January 13, 2021

The Executive Committee reviews Council business and develops the full Council agendas. This committee acts for the Council in all matters requiring decision between full Council meetings.

Executive Committee meetings were held on:

- January 30, 2020
- February 26, 2020
- March 27, 2020
- April 1, 8, 15 and 29, 2020
- May 6, 20 and 27, 2020
- June 3, 10 and 17, 2020
- July 1, 8, 15 and 29 2020
- August 12, 19 and 26, 2020
- September 2, 9 and 17, 2020
- October 7 and 21, 2020
- November 4, 2020
- December 2, 16 and 30, 2020

Nominating/Membership Committees prepare an annual slate of officers for the Council and monitor Council attendance and advise the Chair on activities related to the process of filling membership vacancies.

Membership Committee meetings were held on:

- February 26, 2020
- September 30, 2020
- November 9, 2020

Nominating Committee meetings were held on:

- July 9, 2020

The Legislative Committee reviews proposed legislation and summarizes the information to inform the Council, generates testimony, responds to legislation, and assists the full Council in developing priority areas and communication strategies to widely disseminate these priorities. The legislative session convened February 5, 2020 and was scheduled to adjourn May 6, 2020. However, state legislative leaders announced April 21, 2020, that the remaining session was canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic, and the Committee did not meet.

FUNCTIONS OF THE COUNCIL

The Council has been authorized by the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* since the Act's inception in 1975. The Council is one of 50 “state advisory panels” authorized by the IDEA of 2004 [see regulations in *Code of Federal Regulations (CFR)*, 34 CFR Section 300.167]. The Council is also authorized under *Section 10-76i* of the *Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.)* with the express purpose to "advise the General Assembly, the State Board of Education (SBE) and the Commissioner of Education" on special education matters. The Council is specifically mandated by the IDEA and state statute to accomplish the following duties:

State Advisory Council Functional Advisory Areas – per Amendments to *C.G.S. Section 10-76i* (e.g., *P.A. 10-175*) and IDEA State Advisory Panel Duties (34 CFR Section 300.169)

- Advise the CSDE of unmet needs in educating children with disabilities and on the administration of the provisions of sections 10-94f to 10-94k, inclusive.
- Review periodically the laws, regulations, standards, and guidelines pertaining to special education and recommend to the General Assembly, and the State Board of Education any changes which it finds necessary.
- Comment publicly on any new or revised regulations, standards and guidelines proposed for issuance.
- Advise the CSDE in developing corrective action plans to address findings identified in Federal monitoring reports under Part B of the Act.
- Advise the CSDE in developing and implementing policies relating to the coordination of services for children with disabilities.
- Participate with the State Board of Education in the development of any state plan for provision of special education.
- Comment publicly on any procedures necessary for distributing federal funds received pursuant to the Education of the Handicapped Act, 89 Statute 774, 1975, 20 U.S.C. Code § 1400 et seq., as from time to time amended.
- Assist the CSDE in developing and reporting such data and evaluations as may be conducted pursuant to the provisions of said act.
- Report to the General Assembly not later than January fifteenth in the odd-numbered years and not later than February fifteenth in the even-numbered years, concerning recommendation for effecting changes in the special education laws.
- Review Due Process Hearing data and discuss findings and decisions. (34 CFR Section 300.513(d)) and (34 CFR Section 300.514(c)).
- Receive information regarding the provisions of a Free and Appropriate Public Education. Waiver of non-supplant requirement. (34 CFR Section 300.164(c)(4)).
- Advise the CSDE with regard to the determination of risk ratio thresholds above which disproportionality is significant. (34 CFR Section 600.647(b)(iii)(A)).

PROCESS for DETERMINING the “UNMET NEEDS” of STUDENTS with DISABILITIES:

According to *34 CFR Section 300.169*, the Council’s duties include identifying the “unmet needs” within the state in the education of children with disabilities.

The Council engaged in the following activities in order to obtain data and information from a variety of stakeholders to assist the Council in determining the “unmet needs”. As with many things, this year proved to be unique and challenging as the needs of students with disabilities, parents, and educators were impacted by the pandemic. The Council engaged in the following activities to meet this responsibility:

- Council members shared input and provided reports from their representative stakeholder group during Full Council meetings during “Round Table.”
- Reports from the Parent Training Information center, CT Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC).
- Reports from the Connecticut Council of Administrators of Special Education (ConnCASE) representative.
- Reports from adult agency representatives, including Department of Developmental Services (DDS) and Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS)/ Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB).
- Reports from the Department of Children and Families (DCF).
- Reports from the juvenile justice system.
- Reports from the McKinney-Vento representative.
- Reports from parents and representatives from a number of local, regional, and statewide parent groups.
- Reports from students and the student/youth forums (Leadership Training and Symposium).
- Public comment during meetings.
- State Department of Education presentations and reports.
 - Special Education Division Director presentations, Dispute Resolution, State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP), IDEA grant, disproportionality/ disproportionate representation (special education identification and special education disability category) and CT Alternative Assessment System data.
- Additional virtual meetings of the full Council, the Executive Committee, and ad hoc committees were scheduled in response to the pandemic.

2020-2021 PRIORITIES

As with many things this past year, the setting, adjustment, and subsequent work on the priorities of the Council was unique. Although there are many important issues and topics within special education, the Council focused its advisory work on areas the group found particularly important based on a variety of factors. There were three distinct periods for the Council in the 2019-2020 year and our work reflected these time periods as follows:

- Initial 2019-2020 priorities
- COVID-19 Pandemic Response during Spring/Summer 2020
- Revised priorities for 2020-2021

Initial 2019-2020 Priorities

During the summer of 2019, the Council engaged in its planning session/summer retreat to identify priorities for the coming school year. This process is completed during our annual meeting as Council members engage in activities resulting in the identification of special education priorities. During this session the Council identified the following three areas which were approved by the Full Council during the following meeting.

- Teacher Preparation
- Assistive Technology and Accessible Educational Materials
- Secondary Transition

Teacher Preparation

The importance of this issue for students with disabilities cannot be overstated. The quality, experience and abilities of teachers have a direct correlation to the success of students. Students with disabilities are general education students first, making it equally important to provide comprehensive training and preparation to both special education *and* general education teachers to appropriately support the learning of special education students in their Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

Future considerations for the CSDE and CT legislators:

- Ensure high quality teacher preparation by analyzing program requirements and requiring a certain level of coursework in special education.
- Include a more robust special education curriculum for all future general education teachers with a possible dual certification or “minor” in special education.
- Include training/coursework on family/educator partnerships for all educators.
- Improve outreach efforts and incentives to recruit a greater number of and more diverse special education teachers including utilizing existing grant programs and tuition reimbursement programs, collaborations between community colleges and state university certification programs, and high school capstone programs.

Assistive Technology (AT) and Accessible Educational Materials (AEM)

Assistive Technology and Accessible Educational Materials ensure equitable access for students with disabilities to the same materials and technologies used by all learners, and support their independence, participation, and progress in school. Students have the right to be educated in their least restrictive environment and have access to appropriate AT and AEM for students who require it. For example, a student with a significant language impairment using an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) device to support communication and socialization skills may be able to participate in the general education classroom to a greater extent rather than without it. To address the variety of issues that are related to AT and AEM the Council recommends the following:

Future considerations for the CSDE:

- Provide training to school districts and planning and placement teams to ensure consistent consideration of a student's AT needs and appropriate evaluation of students.
 - Synthesize the salient sections of The Connecticut Assistive Technology Guidelines into a brief webinar for the viewership of various consumers: students, parents, districts and other interested parties.
- Communicate and emphasize to districts, the expectation for comprehensive, high quality, *continuous* training for staff *and* family members to support use of AT for students who require it, as part of the provision of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).
- Build the capacity of the State to assist school districts in evaluating students for AT needs and to train and provide ongoing consult to districts and families.

Future Consideration for CT legislators:

- Mandate the development of a Language and Communication Plan for students with significant speech and language impairments; currently it is only a requirement for students who are deaf and hard of hearing.
- Provide funding for the training school districts need to appropriately evaluate and implement AT for students with disabilities; this investment could lower the need for out of district placements or more restrictive settings within the districts.

Secondary Transition

Secondary transition is a critical requirement in the education of students with disabilities. Students have spent up to 19 years in the education system before they transition to life beyond secondary school. Students will transition to a variety of settings in the adult world including post-secondary education, employment, and independent living, potentially supported by a variety of adult service agencies.

The transition services provided should afford students appropriate opportunities to participate in real-life, hands on employment or post-secondary experiences. Opportunities should be individualized to the student in the least restrictive environment and in a competitive employment setting. Students need quality transition services that allow them to fully explore opportunities that are aligned with their interests and skills. Students are entitled to a free and appropriate public education, but upon exit from special education, adult services are not a guaranteed entitlement. This fact places a great deal of importance on the provision of robust transition services for students with disabilities.

Future considerations for the CSDE:

- Provide guidance to school districts and PPTs on the development and implementation of transition plans that are meaningful and individualized to the student and carried out with fidelity.
- Ensure all schools and districts have high expectations for students’ post-secondary outcomes and prioritize general monitoring and supervision activities to emphasize shared accountability for post-secondary results (employment, education, and independent living).
- Support the Council in strengthening our collaboration with the Transition Task Force so that we can collaboratively work on secondary transition issues.

Future considerations for CT legislators:

- Revise CGS 10-76d(a)(9); Public Act 19-49: An Act Concerning Transitional Services for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder to require PPT’s to engage in transition planning for all students commencing no later than the date on which the first individual education program takes effect for a child who is at least fourteen years of age (regardless of the primary disability category).

COVID-19 Pandemic Response during Spring/Summer 2020

The Executive Committee provided direct feedback to the Commissioner of Education at one of its weekly meetings and wrote a letter highlighting recommendations for the CSDE and the Re-Entry Task Force in regard to considerations for students with disabilities. (See Appendix B). When schools closed on March 16, 2020, the Executive Committee met weekly in order to be responsive to the changing needs during the pandemic.

The Committee designed the following three rapid response structures (Ad-hoc committees) so that members of the Council could be responsive to the CSDE during the ever-changing dynamics of the pandemic:

Special Education Guidance

This Ad-hoc committee reviewed and provided feedback on CSDE topic briefs and guidance documents and emphasized the importance of equitable access, educational benefit, partnership with families, and the provision of FAPE to the greatest extent possible in the LRE.

The Council values the extent to which the CSDE sought and incorporated our input and recommends the continuation of this process. It is important to note that the Council does not agree with the standard the CSDE has in its COVID-19 Guidance of implementing the Individualized Education Program (IEP) to the “greatest extent feasible” rather than to the “greatest extent possible” in circumstances where the parent/family opts for a fully remote program for the student and believes that this standard adversely impacts our most vulnerable students, creating a dangerous loophole that allows districts to *not provide* the services these students desperately need and are entitled to, instead of working towards creative ways to meet those needs.

Evaluations and Standards

There were a number of important and impactful considerations related to special education evaluations brought to light during the early stages of the pandemic. Due to the changed nature of education, evaluations became challenging for educators and students/parents while at the same time they became even more critical for students. Diligence, creativity and an open mind were required to conduct initial evaluations, three-year re-evaluations and annual reviews. Many students’ planning and placement teams and evaluation processes were delayed and disrupted during the pandemic. Aware of the many challenges, Council members worked to provide ideas and advice around this crucial element of special education.

Recommendations provided to CSDE:

- Ensure districts have a process to prioritize and complete initial evaluation referrals received prior to COVID-19 school classroom closures that include parent/family input with an emphasis on students with higher levels of need.
- Ensure students in need of reevaluations for continued eligibility continue to receive appropriate services and evaluations are completed in an appropriate and timely manner.
- Ensure plans and processes are in place for the appropriate and timely evaluation of students should remote learning be in place for part or all of the student population.
- Require school districts to have plans and processes in place to perform appropriate and timely evaluations of students in a remote learning environment.

Future considerations for the CSDE and CT legislators:

- Support PPTs in designing and conducting comprehensive evaluations within the in-person, hybrid, or remote learning environments.

Best Practices for Remote Learning

With remote learning becoming widespread in the spring of 2020 and continuing to exist in many districts in the 2020-2021 school year, it is of utmost importance to provide high-quality remote instruction to ensure the provision of FAPE for students. Students with disabilities are at a greater risk than their non-disabled peers, of being adversely impacted by remote instruction and may take significantly longer to remediate lost skills.

Appropriate planning, preparation, and execution of remote instruction for students with disabilities is critical. The following summary describes the Committee's work which began in the spring/summer of 2020 and continues to present:

Future considerations for the CSDE and CT legislators:

- Provide funding for districts to employ remote learning specialists to support teacher development, family education, and student technology use and support.
- Provide appropriate funding and resources for educators to be trained in best practices in remote instruction and to have appropriate time for planning, preparing and delivering that instruction.
- Ensure appropriate access to technology and connectivity including the accessibility of remote instruction or students with disabilities.
- Provide resources to districts, educators and families including those available from Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), State Education Resource Center (SERC), and other researchers of best practices.
- Screen for and support students with social emotional school-based concerns.

Revised Priorities for 2020-2021

During the summer of 2020, the Council engaged in a planning session/summer retreat to identify priorities for the coming school year with a focus on the COVID-19 related impact on school reopening. The Council identified the following three areas to address during the 2020-2021 school year including Policies and Procedures, Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), and Best Practices for Remote Learning.

Policies and Procedures

There are many policies and procedures related to special education, some of which have taken on additional importance and come under increased scrutiny and focus as a result of the pandemic. Though this work is ongoing, members of the Council submit the following recommendations:

Future considerations for the CSDE:

- Continue to involve the Council in providing feedback on all of its policies and procedural guidance.
- Develop policies, procedures and clear guidance for compensatory or recovery services without delay that emphasizes and requires services based on student needs, not district resources.
- Update the Procedural Safeguards Notice Required Under IDEA Part B and without delay approve, post, and distribute the updated safeguards for educators and families.

- Review capacity to support the dispute resolution process in the wake of COVID-19, and continue monitoring the Bureau of Special Education’s ability to conduct processes within the mandated timelines.
- Continue to report to the Council the number of complaints and resolutions of mediations and due process hearings, as well as the number resolved within the mandated timelines.

Future Considerations for the CT legislators:

- Provide additional funding to staffing the Bureau of Special Education (BSE) to build its capacity to support school districts in serving our most vulnerable students and to assist effective and timely resolutions in the dispute resolution processes that protect student rights.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

The education of students in their least restrictive environment (LRE) continues to be a priority for the Council, especially during the pandemic. There are many factors that contribute to students being placed in a more restrictive setting that are not simply due to student need, but due to a lack of district resources, appropriate training or expertise of staff, and not utilizing appropriate supports such as assistive technology.

Future considerations for the CSDE and CT legislators:

- Focus on the recruitment and continuous development of staff for special education and related services; lack of appropriate expertise in district contributes to students being educated in separate classrooms or out of district placements.
- Provide training and resources to support general education teachers’ capacity to support students with disabilities’ learning in the general education classroom to help them overcome the challenges they face in providing appropriate differentiated instruction and materials.
- Educate districts on the importance of assistive technology in increasing students’ ability to access curriculum, socialize with their peers, and access language and communication in the least restrictive environment.

Best Practices for Remote Learning

As mentioned above in the COVID priorities section, the importance of appropriate planning, preparation, and execution of remote instruction for students with disabilities is critical. The Council’s work in this area was started in the spring and continues through this school year. Many areas of concern have been highlighted including access to technology and connectivity, lack of at home support for students, need for time for educators to plan, prepare and deliver instruction, and accessibility of remote instruction for students with disabilities.

CLOSING

In addition to the three areas identified above, the Council is committed to continuing work on the SPP/Annual Performance Report (APR)(17 Indicators); advising the CSDE on the build of the CT Special Education Data System (SEDS); meaningful inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education setting; mental health and special education; parent/school partnerships; and due process burden of proof.

The Council would like to encourage members of the public to attend future meetings. Our meeting schedule and information about The Council can be found by clicking on the following link: [Council Meetings](#).

The Council is also committed to creativity and improving communication structures to receive information from students, parents, families, educators and all stakeholders who are interested in improving educational experiences for students who require special education. We look forward to the 2021, the ongoing work, and fulfilling the awesome responsibility of the duties of this Council.

Respectfully Submitted,



Tammy Raccio, Chairperson
tammy.raccio@gmail.com
State Advisory Council for Special Education
Connecticut State Department of Education

c/o Bryan Klimkiewicz
Special Education Division Director
Bureau of Special Education
Connecticut State Department of Education
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APPENDIX A

State Advisory Council Membership Composition and Vacancies

	SAC Member	Role	Appointment
1	Audra Mae Talbot	Parent	Commissioner of ED
2	Nachi Bhatt	DCF	DCF Commissioner
3	Brian Smith	DDS	DDS Commissioner
4	Louis Tallarita	CSDE	Commissioner of ED
5	Sonia Taylor-Smith	Parent	Commissioner of ED
6	Doris Maldonado	Parent	Commissioner of ED
7	Monica Hatton	Parent	Commissioner of ED
8	Tammy Raccio	Parent	Commissioner of ED
9	Mike Nunes	Corrections	Commissioner of Corrections
10	Jane Hampton Smith	CPAC	Parent Training Institute
11	Jill Barry	State Rep Gen Assembly	Majority Leader of the House of Representatives
12	Allison Kopie	ADS	DORS Commissioner
13	Catherine Summ	ADS	DORS Commissioner
14	Joan Nicoll-Senf	CCSU	Commissioner of ED
15	Tom Cosker	Parent	Commissioner of ED
16	Kasey Considine	Dis Rights CT	Statute/ OPA
17	Patricia Nunez	Judicial Dept.	Judicial Branch
18	Bryan Klimkiewicz	CSDE	Commissioner of ED
*	Jolie Medina	CSDE	CSDE Support for SAC
19	Jeffry Spahr	Parent	Governor
20	Jennifer Lussier	Parent	Governor
21	Jonathan Metcalf	Parent	Governor
	SAC Member	Role	Appointment
		Student	SAC Appointment
		Student	SAC Appointment
		Student	SAC Appointment
		Student	SAC Appointment
22	Cassandra Reilly	Charter	Majority Leader of the House of Representatives, letter pending
23	Ana Wittig	CAPSEF	Minority Leader of the House of Representatives, letter pending
24	Kim Williamson	CT SLHA	President Pro-Tempore of the Senate
25	Jane Goundrey	Parent	Governor letter pending
26	Rick Raucci	Public School Teacher	Majority Leader of the Senate letter pending
27	Melissa Wrigley	Parent	Governor letter pending
28	Goviana Morales	Parent	Governor letter pending

29	Jake Shumbo	Parent or Individual	Governor letter pending
30	Susan Lemke	ConnCASE	Waiting for letter from Speaker House of Representatives
31	Denise Drummond	Parent or Individual	Parent Leadership Training Institute within the Commission on Children
32	Robin Comey	State Representative	
33	Liz Linehan	State Representative	
34		General Assembly	President Pro Tempore of the Senate
35		General Assembly	Minority Leader of the Senate
36		General Assembly	Speaker of the House of Representatives
37		General Assembly	Minority Leader of the House of Representatives
Ad-Hoc			
	Marisa Mascolo Halm		Center for Children's Advocacy

Revised 11/20

APPENDIX B

State Advisory Council Fall Reopening Plan Recommendations

Special Education Considerations for Re-entry

While re-entry will present challenges for all, students with disabilities may experience these challenges to a greater extent than their general education peers and take longer to remediate lost skills. Additionally, there will be a backlog of special education and related services to be delivered, evaluations to be completed, and Planning and Placement Team meetings to be held. During the abrupt transition to distance learning, the educational inequities across the state concerning access and the level and amount of support and services provided, have significantly impacted our students with disabilities. During the planning for all students, the State Advisory Council for Special Education (SAC) urges the Commissioner of Education and the Re-entry Task Force to consider the following for students, families, and educators in special education:

Equity

Develop uniform standards and protocols for long-distance learning and re-opening across all districts.

Develop a clear system for accountability of these standards

- **Access to technology for *each* student;** many families are struggling to share one device with multiple children. Technology must also be appropriate based on the individualized needs of each student.
- **Professional development for educators** on using technology and effective practices for distance learning, communicating and partnering with families effectively and supporting the behavioral, and social-emotional needs of students during and after the pandemic
- **Training and supports to build the capacity of families** to support their special education student's learning, behavior and social-emotional needs at home. This should include a system to provide differentiated support for students whose families have significant barriers to supporting their child's learning at home (such as ELL families and parents/guardians with learning disabilities).
- **Additional funding** should be designated to support districts in their provision of FAPE, including recovery services for special education students.

Flexibility and Individualization for Special Education Students

Students with disabilities face many challenges including health concerns and may be disproportionately affected by changes in their education, requiring flexibility in how their individual re-entry occurs. SAC believes there needs to be allowed and articulated flexibilities in relation to student need, based on present levels of functioning, facilitating various means of re-entry based on both student and family concerns.

- **Schedule flexibility** - Planning and Placement Teams should make scheduling and placement decisions based on *individual student needs*.

- Example 1: Student with autism who relies on highly structured environments and schedules to benefit from their education. Returning to school with all of the health precautions (like masks, social distancing) on top of different schedules with frequent transitions could be detrimental to such students.
- Example 2: There are a large number of students who have medical complexities (or live with someone who does). Families should be given the option to continue distance learning without penalty if they have health concerns. There are educators who may also be immunocompromised, so perhaps they could be a designated distance learning teacher rather than returning to the physical classroom.
- **Masks** - If masks will be required, flexibility will be necessary for many students with disabilities for a variety of reasons.
 - Many students will have a difficult time wearing a mask or keeping one on for an extended period of time.
 - Consider students who receive speech therapy as it is difficult to wear a mask while working on articulation sounds. Staff cannot see how a student is pronouncing sounds and there is no visual model for the student if staff is wearing a mask.
 - Some students may fear others that are wearing masks.
 - Consideration should be made for children who are deaf and hard of hearing and utilize the strategy of lip reading, not just during their therapy sessions, but throughout the school day when they are learning and socializing.
 - There are masks with a clear view of the mask wearer's mouth. In considering the need to order PPE and other materials, this type of mask may be appropriate for certain student populations and the educators who work with them.

Proactive and continuous planning is needed for special education students in partnership with families. Many special education students are working on just maintaining skills, while many of their general education peers are learning new material and moving forward.

- **Plan for social/emotional and mental health support for students, families, and staff.** Given the known debilitating mental health issues prevalent in the school age population and the associated surge of childhood anxiety during the statewide closure of school buildings, it is important that plans be made in providing tangible supports with active strategies (possibly in partnership with community providers) to support the return of students to in-person schooling; especially students with disabilities and other vulnerable populations.
- **Statewide Restorative Practices Training** will give educators the tools and mindset to support students through expected exacerbated behaviors, rather than responding punitively. Students with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined and it is critical to proactively create a supportive school climate that uses restorative practices to ensure this pandemic does not result in an epidemic of arrests, suspensions and expulsions.
- **Additional services will be required** for some students with disabilities, requiring more staff time for planning and meeting with students.

- **The provision of related services must continue** to take place and it will be important for the Commissioner to offer guidance on how to best provide these services and ensure that they are being offered.
- **Accessibility of technology** must be thoughtful in planning for the possibility of future COVID closures and the possible need to return to distance learning. If a district is going to use a particular software/hardware, it must consider and plan for accessibility for students with disabilities and provide teachers and parents needed assistive technology support.
- **Travel** - Consider the need for more transportation to accommodate social distancing safety measures, especially for out of district placements where the ride may be longer, students may take a van and be in very close proximity to each other. Increased cost, increased need for drivers and paras. Possibly offer to pay mileage reimbursement to families who are able and willing to transport their own student.

Communication and moving forward together

- **Dissemination of information to all stakeholders** is key, and this includes the smaller agencies and outside service providers who provide educational services to children. It is important that we work together as a team, and timely dissemination of information to everyone will help ensure this.
- **Distance learning plans** for each school district should be put in place and communicated to students and families well in advance of re-entry.
- **Utilize the [State Advisory Council for Special Education](#)** for wide special education stakeholder input and assistance with guidance and planning moving forward. Under the authority of 34 Code of Federal Regulations 300.167 and Section 10-76i of the Connecticut General Statutes, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) maintains an Advisory Council for the purpose of providing policy guidance with respect to special education and related services for children and youth with disabilities (ages 3 years to 21 years) in the state.

Conclusion

These are many issues and challenges faced by CT school districts upon planning for and executing reentry. Please consider and prioritize the needs of the 18% of school aged students in CT who have a disability. The State Advisory Council for Special Education is a diverse, knowledgeable and committed group of stakeholders who are prepared to provide assistance in this re-entry planning.

Respectfully,

Tom Cosker, Chair

Jen Lussier, Vice Chair